

## **BLACK HISTORY MONTH RECAP: CULTURAL AWARENESS BRINGS ABOUT CHANGE**

**By Trudy L. Washington, Ph.D., PSB-QID, Cultural Competency Unit**

Each year, February marks the celebration of Black History Month. Based on the belief that a brighter future is on the horizon, an entire month of events – held nationwide – reflects the rich cultural heritage and values of people of African descent in the U.S, and honors their history, achievements and contributions. The month hosts a myriad of celebrations that inspire *Hope, Wellness and Recovery*. This spirit of optimism resounds loudly through the terse, but highly inspirational words of our nation's first and current African American president, Barack Obama, who asserted to fellow Americans, "Yes, we can!"

Black History Month is the successor to Black History Week which was initiated on February 12, 1926 by Dr. Carter Woodson, a historian and Harvard University graduate, and son of former enslaved Africans. In February 1970, leaders of Black United Students, Kent State University, held the first official celebration of Black History Month. Six years later, President Gerald Ford's words promoted *cultural awareness and change* as he encouraged the public to "seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of Black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history." Since then, every U.S. president has designated February as Black History Month. Interestingly, Canada and the United Kingdom also dedicate a month for celebrating Black history.

Each year, a theme is chosen. This year's theme was "At the Crossroads of Freedom and Equality" in celebration of two important African American turning points – the 1863 "Emancipation Proclamation" and the 1963 "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" which is also the occasion that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his uplifting "I Have a Dream" speech.

A noteworthy highlight in L.A. this year was the annual Pan African Film Festival that has gained recognition as "America's largest and most prestigious international Black film festival." It featured 154 global films that reinforce positive images and cultural strengths, while dispelling negative stereotypes. Awards were given for "Best Film" in various categories. Another acclaimed event, the Pan African Art Festival, featured international artists who showcased African-inspired fine art, photography, one-of-a-kind fashions, jewelry and home décor.

Speaking a multi-cultural truth, Dr. Maya Angelou, author and poet, captures the importance of cultural awareness:

*For Africa to me...is more than a glamorous fact. It is a historical truth. No man can know where he is going unless he knows exactly where he has been and exactly how he arrived at his present place.*